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EVOLUTIONARY LOVE POEMS

BY JEN ZNIDARSIC '99

The traditionally accepted format of the love poem has been historically attributed to authors such as Petrarch and William Shakespeare, poets who have immortalized the sonnet as the most commonly recognized style of verse in regards to love poems. Eloquent in language and form, these poems were renowned for their romantic quality and hidden sensuality. While not exclusively utilized by male poets, many sonnets originated as love poems portraying women as the main objects of affection through the lovesick eyes of men. Although many readers and critics alike have regarded such poems as "superb" works of romantic literature, there exists today a movement away from traditional love poems in order to accommodate the changing society in which we live.

Throughout her career as a writer, Adrienne Rich has taken it upon herself to alter the face of traditional poetry in an effort to appeal to a more diverse audience. As Rich matured within her relationships and as a writer, so did her poetry. According to McGuirk, "In the fifties, Rich's love or marriage poems typically present[ed] a wife- or lover-poet maturely propounding the wisdom of accepting limits" (68). Her poems written in the fifties reflected a time in which the sole responsibility of a wife was to support her husband and care for their children. He continued, "In the sixties, Rich discover[ed] that "The world breathes underneath our bed" (qtd. in McGuirk 69), and that the well-wrought lyric poem [could] not accommodate her present experience in the world" (69). The sixties were a time of great change, confusion, and protest in America. Civil Rights, war, and free-love demonstrations were common across the nation. As a result, Rich yearned for more depth and a greater statement in her writing. Finally, "it [was] in the seventies," McGuirk added, "with the development of a positive feminism and an alternative order to the bourgeois marriage and well-wrought poem, that Rich [began] to break a path that [led] beyond the lyric of pathos to a rhetorical lyric practice" (69). Rich had unleashed her feminist notions to the world and there was no end to her newfound passion.

In an interview with Matthew Rothschild, Rich exclaimed that poetry is, in itself, a powerful mode of activism. "Through its very being, poetry expresses messages beyond the words it is contained in; it speaks of our desire; it reminds us of what we lack, of our need, and of our hungers. It keeps us dissatisfied" (35). Certainly, Rich has been a key activist in the battle for women's "liberation," but argues, "you don't make a political movement simply out of words" (Montenegro 8). Determined to re-vise literature in an attempt to focus attention on the plight of women, Rich published a book of poetry entitled *The Dream of a Common Language* in 1978, in which she longed for a world filled with the voices of united and powerful women.

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The Dream of a Common Language is, with the exception of one poem ("Nights and Days"), about what has been or is possible among women in the world as we know it. Its limitations constitute the gap between the infinite of the imaginary and the contradictions of the extant; between the force of the single, well-exercised will and voice and the long, hard way toward commonality, of love, of language, of trust. (Broumas 323)

While the title of the collection of poems suggests that this "dream" of a female voice is unattainable, Rich has introduced "a newly imagined commonality defined by gender and based upon a rejection of men as both readers and lovers" (Diehl 420). It is inherently a book for and about women, according to McGuirk, but serves its male readers just the same, as it promotes gender awareness and allows male readers to glimpse into the history of women, while acknowledging their quest for power and respect as a community.

At the core of *A Dream of a Common Language* is the section of "Twenty-One Love Poems," which actually includes twenty-two poems, formatted as a short story, documenting a romantic relationship from the initial infatuation to its unfortunate termination. Much controversy has surrounded the reading of these poems, as they were intended by Rich to be read as lesbian love poems, rather than simply universal love poems. While McGann argues that lyric poems are experienced by readers primarily through identification and are, therefore, in a sense "universal," Rich denies this theory, contending that these poems in particular were written as a social and political statement and cannot justifiably be read in any other manner.

Responding to two women who read *Twenty-One Love Poems* with their male lovers and praised the "universality" of the poems, Rich exclaimed,

I found myself angered, and when I asked myself why, I realized that it was anger at having my work essentially assimilated and stripped of its meaning, 'integrated' into heterosexual romance. That kind of 'acceptance' of the books seems to me a refusal of its deepest implications. (qtd. in McGuirk 78)

It is readers like these that re-emphasize the issue that Rich has made a strong and forceful attempt to reconcile—the issue of patriarchy in our society and the woman's tendency to cooperate with the historical norms and traditions of such a society. Jane Hedley states that,

In "Twenty-One Love Poems," Rich sought to regender the love poem sequence by taking issue not only with its overt agenda but also, at a more subliminal level, with its formal conventions and figurative strategies, on behalf of making love or being in love that they have systematically blocked. (qtd. in Estrin 24)

Through this sequence, Rich has identified the traditional love poem, redefined its identity, and offered an alternative solution to women forced into silence and submission in this male-dominated world. Blatantly advocating lesbianism in "Twenty-One Love Poems" as this solution, she argues that the bond shared by women can negate the evils posed by a patriarchal society.

If a reader could merely change a few pronouns throughout these poems in order to read them as the story of a heterosexual love affair, then Rich would not have done

justice to her re-vision of the love poem. Clearly, the continual references to oppression, female relationships, lost identity, homelessness, and dreams to gain power set these poems apart from the traditional love poem. The images portrayed in "Twenty-One Love Poems" are, arguably, metaphors for the patriarchal society in which Rich lives and her solutions are presented in the form of dreams and myths, signifying her prospects of liberation. Although Rich believes that her goals are attainable, she fears that her fellow womankind will fail to gain the strength needed to free themselves from the shackles of men. Jean Kennard believes that it is necessary to discover a manner in which to read and write about literature "that does not reconfirm the universality of heterosexual experience" (662). Adrienne Rich has done just that.

"Twenty-One Love Poems" begins in a city, with three images: "metal," "disgraces," "and the red begonia perilously flashing / from a tenement sill six stories high" (I, 9-10). The coldness of the male-dominated world has been set as the scene with notions of "pornography," "vampires," "victimized hirelings," and "garbage" along the streets. And yet a red flower, bold, thriving, but altogether out of place, is seen high above the filth and disgraces of the city. This is the first representation of women in these poems, a symbol of hope and prosperity in a seemingly ugly and dismal world. Rich displays her loyalty to women and desires for strength when she says, "No one has imagined us. We want to live like trees, / sycamores blazing through the sulfuric air, / dappled with scars, still exuberantly budding, / our animal passion rooted in the city" (13-16). Although man has yet to conceive the notion of women gaining power or desiring to be with one another, the possibility exists. For women are strong, like trees, and can weather a storm and survive under the most unbearable conditions in man's city. They thrive, even after hundreds of years of abuse, much like the tree withstands the uncontrollable wrath of mother nature.

The first of the "Twenty-One Love Poems" presents Rich's intense passion for women and her newfound lover from whom she has gained a sense of power. Poem "II" continues with the author's adoration for her lover and traces a dream in which her lover is a "poem." She wants to display her "poem" for all to see, but realizes that this is merely a dream, or an unattainable goal at this time. "To move openly together / in the pull of gravity" (14-16) would defy the normal or traditional male/female relationship in Rich's patriarchal society. But, Rich is tempted to disregard the conventional, as well as her own anxieties.

In the third poem, Rich feels youthful in her new relationship, as she walks the streets with her "limbs streaming with a purer joy" (5) now than they did when she was twenty. Always aware of the hardships that they must face in this love affair, Rich exclaims, "I touch you knowing we weren't born tomorrow, / and somehow, each of us will help the other live, / and somewhere, each of us must help the other die" (15-17). She is confident that future women will not suffer from such discriminations when involved in a same sex relationship. But, now, it is their job to "kill" the memories and influences of the past in order to live more freely in the present. Poem "VIII" also contains the idea of utilizing the mistakes made in history or myth to rectify the present. The author admits that she is the "descendent" of "the woman who cherished / her suffering" (10-11). Refusing to subside, Rich states, "I love the scar-tissue she

handed on to me, / but I want to go on from here with you / fighting the temptation to make a career of pain" (12-14). The fantasy images continue in poem "XIII" with Rich's descriptions of what appears to be a "female world" in which women are "outside the law" (15).

As "Twenty-One Love Poems" is arguably one longer poem that consists of twenty-two sections, the reader is able to detect the increased spirituality and sense of power that Rich gains as the poem progresses. In the sixth poem, she begins to compare her body to that of her lover's, focusing on their similar hands. She begins by saying, "Your small hands, precisely equal to my own— / only the thumb is larger, longer—in these hands / I could trust the world" (1-3). These hands, like women, hold endless possibilities and can perform the same tasks as a man's, yet are even more powerful; these female hands can go so far as to perform acts of violence, thus making them obsolete. Rich is identifying the physical equalities of men and women, but has discovered more compassion and love in the restraint of women.

The only poem that involves actual sexual contact between the two lovers is "THE FLOATING POEM, UNNUMBERED," "meaning everywhere, meaning despite," (325) according to Broumas.

"THE FLOATING POEM" tells not only of a physical intimacy, but of the place of physical intimacy in an "honorable human relationship—that is, one in which two people have the right to use the word 'love'" (Women and Honor.) It is not the physical which defines this love as lesbian, but the absolute and primary attention directed at the other. (Broumas 326)

This poem "floats" because the sexual aspect of their relationship is ever present, but does not dominate their relationship. The numbered poems deal more with the obstacles and hardships hindering their relationship, while the physical aspect of their relationship has always been their ultimate source of power and love. They are beyond the physical and are searching for their fulfillment outside of their sexuality in the larger patriarchal community. "The meeting of lovers in 'Twenty-One Love Poems' is unique because it is on terms which are consciously anti-patriarchal; lovers who are disloyal to patriarchal civilization strive to free themselves from its attitudes even in their intimate relations, even in themselves" (Oktenberg 335). Oktenberg went on to say, "Living in such a world is a paradoxical project for them; they float, unnumbered, in a world anchored with numbers" (334).

Discovering one's sexuality is an "accident" that just "happens," according to Rich. "No one's fated or doomed to love anyone / ...we're not heroines" ("XVII," 1-2). But, "women should at least know the difference / between love and death" ("XVII," 7-8), or a relationship with a woman (love) and a man (death). For "only she who says / she did not choose, is the loser in the end" ("XV," 14-15). Women must make a conscious effort to choose the path of their life or they will be drawn into the traditional patterns set forth by the men of society. Women are forever the victims, for no matter which partner they choose, they are ultimately under the power of men; it is this theory that Rich so desperately attempts to disprove with her "Twenty-One Love Poems."

There exist only two instances within the sequence of poems in which Rich directly addresses the fact that this lover to whom she has been referring is, indeed, a

woman. While some may argue that the remainder of the poems may still be considered "universal," the poems were written as a sequence and were not meant to be read separately. Therefore, once again, Rich "means that no man, no work of literature, no part of patriarchal culture has taken into account the possibility of two women together, loving each other, and of this as the embryonic beginning of a new, woman-centered civilization" (Oktenberg 334). However unorthodox a lesbian relationship may seem to the reader, it was Rich's intention to present such a relationship in an attempt to break the barriers of tradition, give silent women everywhere a voice, and to expose the world to the realities of these changing times.

Poems twelve and nineteen directly address the lover of the author to be a woman. In "XII," Rich states,

But we have different voices, even in sleep, / and our bodies, so alike, are yet so different / and the past echoing through our bloodstreams / is freighted with different language, different meanings— / though in any chronicle of the world we share / it could be written with new meaning / we were two lovers of one gender, / we were two women of one generation. (11-17)

Raised in the same generation of women, these lovers possess distinct pasts as a result of their upbringings in a patriarchal society. Neither speaks a common language of women, as it is yet to be written. But, together, their respective pasts will unite them to create their own language, a unified language, and a new world in which they can live freely as lovers. They have found commonality in love, a unifying experience that will empower them to re-vise the nature of their society.

Similarly, poem "XIX" examines the obstacles faced by the lovers in their male-dominated society. They have not been altogether successful in their attempt to modify the existing and traditionally accepted male/female partnership. Disillusioned, Rich states with a hint of despair, "two women together is a work / nothing in civilization has made simple, / two people together is a work / heroic in its ordinariness" (12-15). It is at this point that Rich foreshadowed the failure of their relationship. Yet, by stating that "two people together is a work," Rich reinforced the fact that the relationship was failing because of their individual differences, and not because a lesbian relationship was an unlikely or incongruous match. The idea of truly connecting with another individual, Rich argued, necessitated much effort, most especially in an "unordinary" situation like theirs.

"Twenty-One Love Poems" is not necessarily Rich's autobiographical account of a personal relationship. Perhaps this is why many critics have argued that these poems do, indeed, possess a universal appeal. It is not that a heterosexual individual could not relate to the poems, their political savvy and powerful transcendence of the "ordinary." However, it is important to note the author's intentions in writing a particular work when reading his/her literature. Truthfully, to some extent, "almost every poem [in "Twenty-One Love Poems"] reflect[ed] an image or previous writing by Rich, simply reverberated" (Oktenberg 339). As Cumpston argued, "She does not pretend to write universal, transcendent truths. Rather, her poems are a way of understanding experience" (425). Rich has related her experiences to her readers in hopes that her voice and message will be heard, that her efforts to construct a "common language"

will not be made in vain. "Telling women's stories, including her own, mean[t] both naming the violations and oppressions and retelling the stories that escaped the grasp of silence, those that had a voice, but no public listener" (Perreault 33).

According to Sandra Runzo,

The most commonly recurring figure throughout Rich's poetry is that of a solitary female exile who wanders through a hostile world. Rich's terrible and terrifying revelation is that this wandering woman *is* the woman in the home; even when a woman thinks she has a home, she remains, in some fundamental way, homeless. (136)

Rich's epitomized "home" is a place in which women can live harmoniously with one another under their own terms, and not those forced upon them by a traditional and patriarchal society. Her city images in the beginning of "Twenty-One Love Poems," constant references to historical incidents, and use of myth indicate that she is searching for a home where all women can finally understand one another and communicate with a single, kindred language. But, until women learn to speak the same language, they will remain powerless within "the sacred institutions of family, marriage, heterosexual romances, that is, the foundations of patriarchal civilization" (Runzo 138).

To Rich, lesbianism is a secret source of power, well kept from most members of society. Discovering this inherent power, Rich stated:

Even before I wholly knew I was a lesbian, it was the lesbian in me who pursued that elusive configuration. And I believe it is the lesbian in every woman who is compelled by female energy, who gravitates toward strong women, who seeks a literature that will express that energy and strength. It is the lesbian in us who drives us to feel imaginatively, render in language, grasp, the full connection between woman and woman. It is the lesbian in us who is creative, for the dutiful daughter of the fathers in us is only a hack. (qtd. in Bennett 222)

It is this connectedness to women that was reflected in "Twenty-One Love Poems." Even in the midst of a painful break-up, Rich referred to that final, dreadful conversation with her lover in poem "XX" in which she stated sadly,

And this is she
with whom I tried to speak, whose hurt, expressive head
turning aside from pain, is dragged down deeper
where it cannot hear me,
and soon I shall know I was talking to my own soul. (8-12)

Judith McDaniel argues, "The strength in these poems is the discovery of the self in another, the range of knowing and identification that seems most possible in same sex love: the encounter of another's pain" (320). This identification with women has allowed Rich to find the strength through the power of her pen to revise and rewrite "tradition".

With the publication of "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision" in 1971, Rich had truly broken new ground in the fight for women's liberation. The article discussed her belief in the power of words as a form of activism and called upon

writers everywhere to join her in her process of "re-vision." Advancing in her efforts to support "liberation," Rich stated:

Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for woman, is more than a search for identity: it is a part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society. (90)

Her intention was to have women everywhere re-evaluate their lives—their relationships, language, viewpoints, and past traditions—and abolish the complacency with which they have simply accepted their "fate." "Twenty-One Love Poems" displayed her ambitious tendencies concerning activism, as it not only contained deep-seated political statements, but also involved a lesbian love affair.

The anger expressed by Rich in response to the argument that "Twenty-One Love Poems" may be read as "universal" was truly justified. All of her beliefs and convictions are completely disregarded when the poems are seen as a heterosexual love affair, as Rich firmly concludes "heterosexism as an institution that oppresses all women," regardless of a woman's choice of partners (Cumpston 424). *The Dream of a Common Language* is not just another book of poetry containing a sequence of love poems; it is a powerful tool with which Adrienne Rich has made a memorable impact upon both the literary world and the general public. She has introduced the idea of creating a new tradition in which women hold the primary responsibility of making their own decisions and choosing their own fates. "Twenty-One Love Poems" is "an appropriate choice for continuing the theme of power, for in these poems Rich shows us a glimpse of the power generated by love, specifically the love of women for women" (McDaniel 320). Discovering the power within her to attempt this grave task of re-writing and re-vision for future generations of women was a feat in itself. Adrienne Rich has truly proven herself a role model from whom women today must learn in order to thrive tomorrow.

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